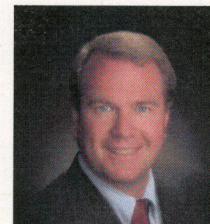


**MONTANA**  
UNIVERSITY SYSTEM

## Tuition freeze would be a great investment of state funds

*By Clayton T. Christian, Montana Commissioner of Higher Education*



The 2013 legislative session is an important time for Montanans who care about the price of enrolling their family members or themselves in college. Over the next four months, legislators and the governor will be working together on the state's budget priorities for the next two years. The Montana University System's top priority is to work with legislators on a college affordability plan (a "CAP") to freeze tuition rates over the next two years. We have a good opportunity for legislators of both political parties, in both the state Senate and the House of Representatives, to join in bipartisan effort and credit for keeping tuition rates affordable for all Montana students and families.

The college affordability plan boils down to this. Colleges and universities are facing certain inflationary costs beyond their control. Montana has done better than any state in the nation to keep college and university costs down. The CAP will work if the Legislature invests adequate state funding toward reasonable inflationary costs of education. This includes full funding of any state employee pay plan that the Legislature may choose to enact for public employees. With this legislative support, the Board of Regents of Higher Education can ensure a tuition freeze for the next two years, with credit and thanks to the members of the Legislature and Gov. Steve Bullock for working together for students and families.

The concept of a CAP has worked before. In 2007, legislators and the governor and the regents worked together to invest state funding in a historic "buy-down" of tuition prices. That commitment was the seed for a remarkable era of tuition freezes and tuition restraint. Tuition rates have been frozen for six consecutive years at most public two-year colleges, and four out of the last six years at most public four-year campuses. At the two largest four-year campuses, we've worked hard to combine tuition freezes in some years with modest tuition increases in other years keep tuition growth more restrained than just about any other state in the nation.

If legislators and the governor strengthen the state investment, it will be supported by strong evidence of resulting economic benefit. State economic researchers recently verified how the expansion of coal mining in Montana would substantially improve the



state's job and wage and tax base. Your university system proudly teaches and trains students to design, build, and manage underground and surface mines. The petroleum boom in the eastern region of our state is served by Montana State University and Montana Tech engineers, University of Montana geologists, Montana State University – Billings plant processing technicians, Montana State University Northern diesel technicians, and many more graduates of the Montana University System.

The same economic researchers who produced the coal study verify that for every dollar the Legislature appropriates to public higher education, there is a direct return of nearly three dollars in state tax revenue to help the Legislature balance the state budget and fund vital services. Success stories could literally fill the pages of this newspaper. Your state colleges and universities provide Montana communities with nurses, physicians, teachers, law enforcement and public safety professionals, skilled trades and craft workers, business owners, and much more.

Montanans are working harder than ever before to find and make opportunities to go to college. Our sense is that the voters of every legislative district would welcome a bipartisan effort to freeze tuition for Montana students and families. We look forward to working with legislators toward that reality.

